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ABSTRACT

Workplace literacy programs have been viewed as the way to raise workers' basic skills so they could perform more effectively in increasingly complex work environments. As these programs have proliferated, so have the number of issues associated with workplace literacy. Some issues are related to assumptions underlying the need for workplace literacy; others have to do with program development and implementation. Many of the issues associated with the assumptions on which the need for workplace literacy programs are based focus on the "language" or vocabulary used to describe this need, language that depicts workers as being deficient or lacking in basic skills. In addition, responsibility and blame for the current economic woes are often placed solely on the workers. A second set of issues is connected to program development and implementation. Nearly every component of workplace literacy programs has affiliated issues, such as curriculum, instructional delivery, assessment, and evaluation. (An annotated listing of 16 print resources and a list of 8 resource organizations are provided.) (YLB)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS

WORKPLACE LITERACY: AN UPDATE

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During the 1980s, the concept of workplace literacy was catapulted to national prominence by the perception that, as a nation, the United States was losing its competitive edge. Viewed by many as a solution to the nation's economic woes, the area of workplace literacy became a growth industry within the education and training community. Workplace literacy programs were developed with the goal of raising workers' basic skills so that they could perform more effectively in increasingly complex work environments.

Many diverse strategies and programs have been implemented to address the need for a better educated work force. As these programs have proliferated so have the number of issues associated with workplace literacy. Some of these issues are related to assumptions underlying the need for workplace literacy whereas others have to do with program development and implementation.

Many of the issues associated with the assumptions on which the need for workplace literacy programs are based focus on the "language" or vocabulary that is used to describe this need. In citing the need for workplace literacy programs, publications frequently depict workers as being deficient or lacking in basic skills. Not only do such descriptions dehumanize workers, but they also fail to take into account the considerable skills and knowledge most bring to the workplace.

In addition, many articles tend to place the responsibility for the current economic woes solely on the worker, failing to acknowledge that literacy is only one component of a more productive work force ("Myth #15" 1991). In contrast, some scholars are now suggesting that government policies and corporate practices--not skills shortages among workers--are primarily responsible for the diminishing competitiveness of the U.S. work force (Weisman 1991, 1992). It is also not unusual to see discussions of the "costs of illiteracy" to business and society linked to insufficient basic skills. Again, in these discussions workers are blamed for large economic losses without considering the role of the organization (Hull 1991).

A second set of issues is connected to program development and implementation. Nearly every component of workplace literacy programs has affiliated issues as illustrated by the following questions:

- **Curriculum**. What should be taught? Should the curriculum be strictly job related or should it be more broadly based? Who should determine what should be taught? To what extent should workers be involved in determining the curriculum? Who should develop the curriculum and on what should it be based?
- **Instructional Delivery**. What are the most effective methods of delivering workplace literacy programs? Is it better to use school-based approaches or those that are more closely aligned with the workplace context? What is the role of peer teaching and collaborative learning in workplace literacy?
- **Assessment**. What constitutes appropriate assessment procedures? Can standardized assessment instruments accurately measure workplace-related skills and knowledge? What can be done to prevent assessment information from being misused?
- **Evaluation**. How can workplace literacy program outcomes be measured? Should the focus be on personal or workplace outcomes?

Although there are many debates about the assumptions underlying workplace literacy programs and the most appropriate approaches to program development, no one disputes the need for such programs. Unfortunately, there is still limited research to guide practice in workplace literacy, but a practice-based literature that can respond to many of the questions and issues related to program development is slowly emerging. The resources on this list can be consulted for further information on workplace literacy programs, including a discussion of related issues. An earlier ***Trends and Issues Alert*** on workplace literacy (ED 304 563) lists additional resources.

Print Resources

Askov, E. N.; Aderman, B.; and Hemmelstein, N. ***Upgrading Basic Skills for the Workplace***. University Park: Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, Pennsylvania State University, 1989. (ED 309 297).

Intended for trainers of literacy providers and practitioners in the field, this manual explains how to develop a workplace literacy program and market it to employers.

Business Council for Effective Literacy. ***Brief Series***. New York: BCEL, various dates.

Briefs contain annotated lists of materials or resources on the following topics: "Computers and Literacy: Curricula and Guides"; "Small Business"; "The U. S. Commercial Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1986"; "Health Care Industry"; "Hotel and Food Service Industries"; "National Technical Assistance Organizations"; and "Workforce and Workplace Literacy: Selected References."

Delker, P. ***Basic Skills Education in Business and Industry: Factors for Success or Failure. Contractor Report***. Washington, DC: Office of Technology Assessment, January 1990. (ED 337 587).

Developed as a background paper for the OTA's report, ***Worker Training: Competing in the New International Economy***, this review of workplace basic skills research and practice identifies factors contributing to program success or failure.

Education Writers Association. ***Is the Story Literacy, Decent Jobs, or Political Will? A Reporter's Guide to Emerging Adult Literacy Issues***. Washington, DC: EWA, 1991. (ED 337 708).

Includes the findings of six reporters from diverse areas who looked at how their communities were responding to adult literacy, basic skills, and workplace literacy programs.

Foucar-Szocki, D. L. ***Beyond Training: A Field Test of the American Society for Training and Development's Workplace Basics***. Staunton, VA: Education and Training Corporation, 1992.

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Reports on the results of a project that tested whether the ASTD Workplace Basics model was feasible, whether it was useful to employees and management, and whether it could be transferred to other workplaces.

Grover, J., and others. ***Research in Workplace Literacy: The Level of Literacy Required in Specific Occupations. Final Report***. Hampton, NH: RMC Research Corporation, February 1990. (ED 319 907).

A study to identify trends influencing the literacy requirements of two entry-level jobs at each of three manufacturing sites and three hospital sites concluded that job descriptions and training manuals were not reliable indicators of literacy requirements but observation and interviews were.

Hull, G. ***Hearing Other Voices: A Critical Assessment of Popular Views of Literacy and Work***. Berkeley: National Center for Research in Vocational Education, University of California, November 1991.

An analysis of the popular, dominant myths of literacy and work and presentation of alternative points of view and critical reassessments.

Merrifield, J.; Norris, L.; and White, L. ***"I'm Not a Quitter!" Job Training and Basic Education for Women Textile Workers***. Knoxville: Center for Literacy Studies, University of Tennessee, 1991.

A case history of one group of women workers, who after losing their jobs in 1988 when a major apparel manufacturers closed a plant, took part in some aspect of the Job Training Partnership Act training program following the closing.

"Myth #15: Management and Labor Agree on Literacy Goals." ***The Literacy Beat*** 4, no. 3, August 1991. (ED 336 547).

This issue of the Education Writers Association newsletter focuses on the differing views of workplace literacy efforts held by labor unions and company management.

Proper, L. ***Workplace Literacy: A Selected Bibliography***. Columbus: Ohio Bureau of Employment Services, April 1992.

An up-to-date listing of over 450 workplace literacy-related publications, each indexed using one or more of the following terms: applied, general, policy, or research.

Sarmiento, T. "Do Workplace Literacy Programs Promote High Skills or Low Wages? Suggestions for Future Evaluations of Workplace Literacy Programs." ***Labor Notes*** (a monthly newsletter of the Center for Policy Research of the National Governors Association) July 1991.

An analysis of current workplace literacy efforts in terms of approach, e.g., high skills or low wages, and a charge to support those that are "high skill."

Taylor, M., and Lewe, G. ***Literacy Task Analysis. A How to Manual for Workplace Trainers***. Ottawa: Adult Basic Education Department, Algonquin College, December 1990. (ED 337 580).

Taylor, M., and Lewe, G. ***Basic Skills Training: A Launchpad for Success in the Workplace***. Ottawa: Adult Basic Education Department, Algonquin College, December 1990. (ED 337 579).

The first examines literacy task analysis practices, tools, and techniques and presents a system for developing and implementing the process. The second includes case studies in five job areas and information about the relationship between job task analysis and literacy task analysis.

Taylor, M. C.; Lewe, G. R.; and Draper, J. A. ***Basic Skills for the Workplace***. Toronto: Culture Concepts, 1991. (ED 333 180).

A practitioner's guide to developing literacy training programs for workers containing 28 chapters divided into four parts: understanding the need for workplace literacy, identifying workplace training needs, examples of practice in workplace basic skills training, and discovering approaches for program development.

Vencill, M. P., and others. ***Workplace Education Efforts in Small Business: Learning from the Field. Final Report***. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Planning Associates, March 1991. (ED 336 510).

Case studies of 18 different education programs conducted by small companies, most of which addressed workers' basic skills needs using workbooks from basic education classes.

Weisman, J. "Some Economists Challenging View that Schools Hurt Competitiveness." ***Education Week*** 11, no. 11 (November 13, 1991): 1, 14-15.

Suggests that skills shortages among high school graduates are not related to diminishing competitiveness of the U. S. work force.

Resource Organizations

AFL-CIO, Education Department, 815 16th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20006 (202/637-5144)

American Society for Training and Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313 (203/683-8100)

Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, 35th Floor, New York, NY 10020 (212/512-2415, 2412)

Center on Education for Training and Employment, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090 (614/292-4353)

Education Writers Association, 1001 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036 (202/429-9680)

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, 1900 Kenny Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1090 (614/292-4353)

Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, 204 Calder Way, Suite 209, University Park, PA 16801-4756 (814/863-3777)

National Center on Adult Literacy, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216 (215/898-2100)

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